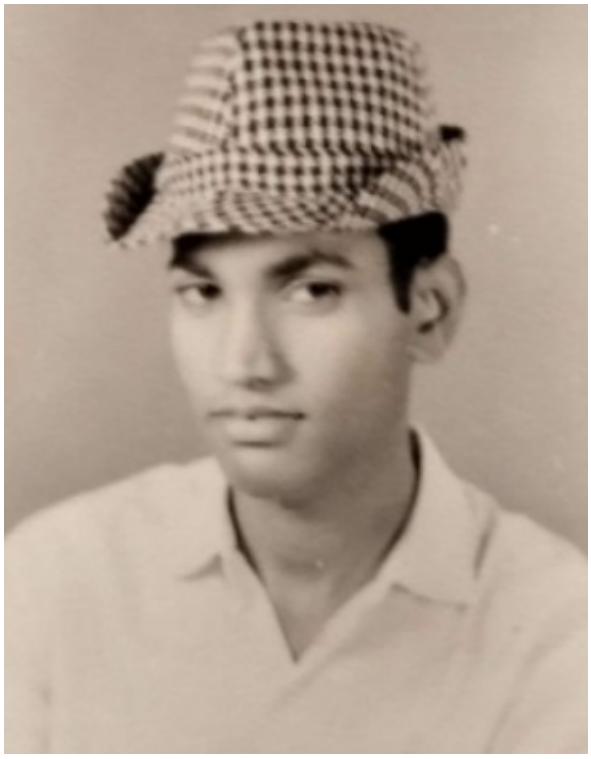

My ‘Novel’ Account of Human Possibility

BS Murthy

Whenever I look at my body of multi-genre work in English, the underlying human possibility intrigues me no end, and why not for my mother tongue Telugu, touted as the Italian of the East, has no linguistic connection with it whatsoever.

To start with, I was born into a land-owning family in Kothalanka, a remote Indian village, of Andhra Pradesh to be precise that is after the British had folded their colonial tents from the sub-continent, but much before the rural education mechanism was geared up therein. It was thus the circumstances of my birth enabled me to escape from the tiresome chores of primary schooling till I had a nine-year fill of an unbridled childhood, embellished by village plays and enriched by grandma’s tales, made all the more appealing by her uncanny storytelling ability. Added to that, as my great great maternal grandfather happened to be a poet laureate at the court of a princeling of yore, maybe their genes together strived to infuse their muses in me their progeny.

However, as the English plants that Lord Macaulay planted in the Hindustani soil hadn’t taken roots in the hinterland till then, it’s the native tongues that held the sway in the best part of that ancient land. No wonder then, well into my secondary schooling, leave alone constructing an English sentence, whenever I had to read one, I used to be afflicted by an unceasing stammer. Maybe, it was at the behest of the unseen hand of human possibility, or owing to his foresight, and /or both that, in time, my father had shifted our family base to the cosmopolitan town of Kakinada to admit me into Class X at the McLaren High School. And with that began my affair with the English language, facilitated by Chinnababu, my classmate, which, courtesy Abbimavayya, my maternal uncle, found fruition in the continental fiction, in translation, however to the detriment of my mechanical engineering education to the chagrin of my vexed father.

Nevertheless, even as the Penguin classics imbibed in me the love for language that is besides broadening my outlook of life, my nature enabled me to explore the possibilities of youth. That's not all, all through; it was as if destiny tended to afford my life to examine its intrigues while fiction enabled me to handle its vicissitudes with fortitude that stood me in good stead throughout. Besides, in those days of yore, as letter-writing was in vogue, I was wont to embellish my missives to friends and the loved-ones with the insights the former induced and the emotions the latter stirred in me. So to say, all those letters that my latter-day novels carry owe more to my ingrained habit than to the narrative need of my muse.

Providentially, when I was thirty-three, my eyes and mind seemed to have combined to explore the effect of the led on the leader, and when the resultant 'Organizational ethos and good Leadership' was published in *The Hindu;* I experienced the inexplicable thrill of seeing one's name in print. Enthused thus by the fortuitous development, I began to articulate my views on general, and materials management, general insurance, politics, and, not to speak of, life and literature in over a score of published articles. But fiction writing was nowhere near my pen and the thought of becoming a novelist was beyond my horizon for Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Nikolai Gogol, Ivan Turgenev, Emily Zola, Gustav Flaubert et al (I hadn't read Marcel Proust and Robert Musil by then) were, and are, my literary deities, and how dare I, their devotee, to envision myself in the sanctum sanctorum of the novel.

All the same, when I was forty-four, having been fascinated by the manuscript of a - satirical novella penned by one Bhibhas Sen, an Adman, with whom I had been on the same intellectual page for the past four years then, it occurred to me, 'when he could, I can for sure'. It was as if Sen had driven away the ghosts of those literary greats that came to shadow my muse but as life would have it, it was another matter that not wanting to foul his work, as he hadn't obliged the willing publisher to pad it up to a 'publishable size', that manuscript remained in the literary limbo.

So, with my muse thus unshackled, I set to work on the skeletal idea of *Pardonables,* the working title of *Benign Flame,* with the conviction that for fiction to impact readers, it should be the soulful rendering of characters rooted in their native soil, not the hotchpotch of the local and foreign caricatures sketched on a hybrid canvas, the then norm of the Indian Writing in English. Yet, it took me a full fortnight to make the narrative flowing with the opening – 'That winter night in the mid-seventies, the Janata Express was racing rhythmically on its tracks towards the coast of Andhra Pradesh. As its headlight pierced the darkness of the fertile plains, the driver honked the horn as though to awake the sleepy environs to the spectacle of the speeding train.'

However, from then on, it was as though a 'novel' chemistry had developed between my muse and the mood of its characters that shaped its fictional course, and soon I came to believe that I had something exceptional to offer to the world of letters, nay the world itself. So, not wanting to die till I gave it to it, I tended to go to lengths to preserve my life that was till I delivered it in nine months with a 'top of the world' feeling at that. Then, when one Spencer Critchley, an American critic, thought that – "It's a refreshing surprise to discover that the story will not trace a fall into disaster for Roopa, given that many writers might have habitually followed that course with a wife who strays into extramarital affairs" – I felt vindicated about my unique contribution. Just the same, as there were no takers to it among the Indian publishers and the Western agents, I was left with no heart to bring my pen to any more paper (those were the pre-keyboard days) though my head was swirling with many a novel idea, triggered by my examined life lived in an eventful manner.

Nevertheless, sometime later, that was after I happened to browse through a published book; I had resumed writing, owing altogether to a holistic reason: while it was the quality of Sen's unpublished work that set me on a fictional course from which I was derailed by the publishers' apathy, strangely, it was the paucity of any literary worth in that published book that spurred me back onto the novel track to pursue the pleasure of writing for its own sake. It's thus; I could reach the literary stations of - *Crossing the Mirage* and *Jewel-less Crown* that was before my pen, in the wake of the hotly debated but poorly analyzed post-Godhra communal riots, took a non-fictional turn with the *Puppets of Faith.*

Thereafter, as if wanting me to lend my literary hand to other genres, my muse heralded me into the arena of translation, ushered me onto the unknown stage, put me on a stream of consciousness, took me to crime scenes, dragged me into the by-lanes of short stories, and driven me into the novella fold. However, as a prodigal son, I took to my first steps into the Telugu short story field with my 'Missteps' తప్పటడుగులు.

Whatever, it was Michael Hart, the founder of the Project Gutenberg, who first lent his e-hand to my books ever in search of readers. But who would have thought that life held such literary possibilities in the English language for a rustic Telugu lad reared in the rural Andhra, even in the post-colonial India? So, the possibilities of life are indeed novel and seemingly my life has crystallized itself in my body of work before death could dissipate it.

My body of work in varied genres is in the public domain: https://g.co/kgs/iA9zkd

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All his fictional work was borne out of his conviction that for fiction to impact readers, it should be the soulful rendering of characters rooted in their native soil but not the hotchpotch of local and alien caricatures sketched on a hybrid canvas.